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Indian Bird Conservation Network

Telugu-Ganga Canal construction in Jerdon's Courser habitat

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Do you remember the cover of April-June 2005, *Mislove*? It depicts a beautiful Jerdon's Courser *Rhinoprius bitorquatus*. In that issue I have explained why it is important to carryout radio-telemetry studies on this critically endangered bird. I was heading to my field station near the Sri Lankameswara Wildlife Sanctuary with full of excitement to start the work in the first week of October 2005. We have got the permission to catch the Jerdon's Courser nearly after four years!

But, there is something which was not expected for nearly 19 years happened recently. Jerdon's Courser was rediscovered in 1986. At the time of the rediscovery, the Jerdon's Courser site was under threat because it was planned to construct the Telugu-Ganga canal across it. Officials from the Forest Department and the State Government of Andhra Pradesh recognised the ornithological importance of the site and declared it as the Sri Lankameswara Wildlife Sanctuary (SLWLS) for Jerdon's Courser and proposed that the course of the canal to be adjusted to avoid the Sanctuary. But now the canal work has started again.

I noticed this in the third week of October 2005. Timely warning given by Bombay Natural History Society and prompt action taken by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department resulted in stopping this canal for the time being.

But the proposed route of this canal not only goes along the Sanctuary border, it will destroy the remaining suitable habitat around the Sanctuary. More importantly when the proposed canal reaches its 40th km it goes very close to the place where the Jerdon's Courser has been sighted regularly right from 1986. This is the only place in the world at the moment where the Jerdon's Courser is known to be present at almost all times.

Though the canal work has been stopped, it has already caused considerable amount of damage to the Jerdon's Courser habitat. Recent study carried out in and around the SLWLS shows that Jerdon's Coursers have a strong preference for a particular density of scrub jungle habitat. It was estimated that potentially suitable habitat lost due to this Telugu-Ganga Canal construction near SLWLS is c. 22 ha. As well as the canal was constructed in the place where Jerdon's Courser was recorded in 2001.

The canal runs along the eastern part of the SLWLS and also it entered the Yerraballi Forest Block which belongs to Forest Department. Bold action taken by Cuddapah Divisional Forest Officer Mr. B. Sundar resulted in stopping the canal construction further into the Jerdon's Courser habitat. This canal is known as Right Canal. Apart from this there is one more canal runs along the western boundary of Sri Peninsula Narsimha Wildlife Sanctuary (SPNWLS). This

part of the SPNWLS falls under the Cuddapah Forest Division. Canal constructed near this sanctuary is known as Left Canal.

It should be noted that these two sanctuaries are declared mainly for the Jerdon's Courser. These two sanctuaries are designated as Important Birds Areas. There are 122 birds species recorded in SLWLS and 50 birds were recorded from the western part of SPNWLS. Needless to say these IBA's are of international importance for the conservation of the critically endangered

The Telugu-Ganga Canal will run through the site where the Jerdon's Courser had once been sighted.



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Jerdon's Courser and their habitat. It is sad that now their habitat is under tremendous pressure due to this canal construction.

Apart from clearing the forest for this canal construction, roads were prepared along the canal route as well as from the main roads to the canal. This is mainly to access the canal site from the main road for heavy vehicles operated for canal construction. These roads were constructed from the nearby villages. This facilitates access for local people to the forest area for unauthorized woodcutting, mainly by tractors and bullock carts.

The new canal poses at least three types of threat to Jerdon's courser.

1. Construction will destroy the remaining scrub jungle habitat of the Jerdon's Courser in the eastern part of the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary.

2. The canal will permit the extension of irrigated agriculture to many areas outside the Sanctuary that are scrub jungle at present. Scrub jungle will be cleared for agricultural purpose and this will remove Jerdon's Courser habitat and diminish the population.

3. Extension of agricultural use will lead to increased human activity in and around the Sanctuary. In turn, this is likely to increase unauthorized human use of the Sanctuary and any remaining scrub jungle outside it. Increased use is likely to deteriorate the suitable habitat of the Jerdon's Courser.



Above: Landsat 7 ETM image of the study area with the preliminary habitat suitability overlaid on it. Habitat of the Jerdon's Courser in the Yerraballi Forest Block shown in blue colour. Green dots indicates Jerdon's Courser records, while the black line shows cleared forest area. (Map not to scale). (Inset) A Jerdon's Courser. Pic: P. Jegannathan

So BNHS suggests that the Right Canal near the Sri Lankamaleswara Wildlife Sanctuary should be diverted from the precious Jerdon's Courser habitat.

I was walking along the canal route with my GPS and mapping it. Some parts of the canal were waterlogged due to recent rain. This attracted few water birds. I saw few Red-wattled Lapwings standing on the bank of the canal. I walked further. They took off and flew towards me and calling "Pity-to-do-it".... "Pity-to-do-it". I know they are telling me that it is pity to have this canal inside the scrub jungle. ■

Detailed report on the impact of the canal on the Jerdon's Courser habitat was prepared and submitted to Government of Andhra Pradesh. The report is also uploaded in BNHS website, www.bnhs.org. We are working along with WWP-India, and Birdwatchers Society of Andhra Pradesh (IBCN Pastors) to save this critically endangered bird and its habitat. We appeal to all the other IBCN members to voice their concerns regarding the Telugu-Ganga Canal by stating your concerns in a polite letter to:

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Please send us a copy of the letter for our record.